



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Culture as the Bad Object

Citation for published version:

Fang, N 2021, 'Culture as the Bad Object'.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Other version

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



‘Culture as the Bad Object’

Nini Fang, University of Edinburgh

nfang@ed.ac.uk

+44 (0) 131 651 1390

Abstract

How might we think about racism psychosocially through Ronald Fairbairn’s object-relations theory? How might doing so leverage creative reinstallation of Fairbairn’s relational thinking that has remained on the marginal space? I seek to respond to these questions by extending Fairbairn’s original concepts, such as ‘moral defence’ (1943), “endopsychic structure” (1944), and “object-relatedness” (1946), in reconceiving the Hostile Environment policy in the conjuncture between the historical, the political and the intersubjective. The populist mobilisation of the Hostile Environment policy here is not conceived simply as cultural-discursive practices, but also one that is charged with forces of violence upon the psychic reality of the racialised subject. Put differently, the hostile environment here can be seen as constituting in the social dimension the ‘bad object’, in a Fairbairnian sense, “too disruptive and threatening to the on-going relationship with the object to remain in awareness” (Celani, 2007, p. 123).

The potential of the Fairbairnian ‘bad object’ lies in its simultaneous holding of both the *rejecting* and *tantalising* elements in relation to the corresponding subject; essentially it is one which is capable of arousing a range of affective investment of the subject who fears and antagonises over the rejecting part of the bad object, but who also is helplessly desirous and engaged by the tantalising part of it. Explored in the context of anti-immigrant society, the hosting land of the UK on one hand embodies the rejecting outlook against the racialised other and on the other symbolises an enduring cultural capital of the Anglophone ‘West’ made seductive by the conceit of colonial supremacy. Addressing this, personal, reflexive account will be interweaved with theoretical complication of the hostile environment as a political phenomenon in order to generate entries into the compelling site of creative mobilisation of psychic defence against the culture as the bad object.

Keywords: Fairbairn, Hostile Environment, endopsychic structure; immigration; reflexivity

Author Bio

Nini Fang is a lecturer in Counselling and Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh. She is a Scholar of the British Psychoanalytic Council. She sits on the Executive Board for the Association for Psychosocial Studies, the Editorial Board for New Associations (British Psychoanalytic Council). She is also the Associate Director for the Centre of Creative-Relational Inquiry (UoE)

Feeling ‘racist’

While on the bus from Edinburgh to Borders, a few stops further down the journey, a group of east Asian people got on, most likely from China from the style of mandarin they spoke. This should not have bothered me, but it did. My account next will investigate what might be going on for me, internally, using Fairbairn’s theory – and I hope you will suspend harsh judgements towards some of what I am going to reveal. Encountering a sense of my being a hypocrite all along has been painful: it challenged crucial parts of my identity, as someone who has written a lot on anti-Asian racism from my first-hand experience of being discriminated against on the ground of race.

My partner and I were on the upper deck in the back section of the bus. The group of Chinese passengers, who appeared to be a university student accompanied by his family, perhaps seizing the opportunity to do some sightseeing before University started. They chose seats near us, behind us, before unleashing their excitements and loud chatters with each other. Other passengers at the front were turning their heads around to indicate annoyance. I could not help but feel embarrassed, as if I was also part of the guilty party, and somehow agitated that they chose to sit so near me, causing me this embarrassment. My impulses were telling me I should move to a different seat to declare that I was not one of ‘them’. My partner, who’s white British, on the other hand, was not bothered by them but more amused by my reaction: ‘they are just excited to be in Scotland for the first time!’, ‘they will settle down eventually’, ‘try focus on the scenery outside’, he said.

Much of these agonies were self-inflicted, of course – no one was accusing me of anything apart from my own self-consciousness of my ‘Chinese-like’ appearance. Feeling my agitation grow at their obliviousness to the ‘looks’ other passengers were casting on them, which I felt I was also on the receiving end of, I continued to feel anxious to find ways to gesture to them that they were being too loud hence causing nuisance, whilst secretly still hoping to assert my difference from *them* by finding an opportunity to move away from *them*. I felt caught in a limbo - to move away from *them* could obviously convey a hurtful message that I, too, found them a nuisance; but to stay where I was meant risking being perceived as one of *them* - the cliché stereotype and popular media portrayal of the ‘rowdy and unruly Chinese Tourists’¹.

‘You see’, I said to my partner upon arrival, ‘this is why people *here* don’t like Chinese people!’

‘You are sounding quite racist just now, you know’ was his joking response.

The truth is: those racist feelings as evoked in me by the incident were unbearable but hardly new. I now wish to expand on these through a Fairbairnian analysis of the UK’s hostile environment, i.e. anti-immigration culture, as the bad object and how I interact with it psychodynamically.

Culture as the Bad Object

¹ See K.M, ‘Chinese Tourists: Mind Your Manners’, The Economist, 6th Nov 2013 and BBC ‘News from Elsewhere’ ‘Switzerland: Special trains for Chinese tourists’, BBC, 28th Aug 2015.

Fairbairn's theory has the psychosocial potential to grow into a unique line of thought on political oppression. His theory on 'moral defence' (1943), 'endopsychic structure' (1944) and 'object-relatedness' (1946) are particularly useful in attending to the question of: how we come to be the person we are through our social relations with others and the surrounding world.

In his paper on *Endopsychic Structure* (1944), Fairbairn suggests that the origin of the endopsychic structure is formed during the early relations with the primary external object, ie the mother. The baby is born into a state of 'absolute dependence' (1944), and, soon enough, experiences realistically the mother's capacity to both satisfy as well as frustrate her needs as an *intolerable* experience. From the psychic reality of the baby, this can be voiced as: 'I am terrified to realise I depend on an object which may or may not look after me.'

Fairbairn argues that infantile dependence generates the most acute internal conflicts and develops corresponding defences in the baby to ward off psychic suffering. The unsatisfactory object-relations are a direct source of splitting and repression because they are "too disruptive and threatening to the on-going relationship with the [external] object to remain in awareness" (Celani, 2007: 123). Moreover, the unsatisfying object is further split into the 'exciting' and 'rejecting' part-objects, which are fundamentally 'bad' objects in Fairbairn's terminology. Exciting object and rejecting object each represent elements of the *intolerable* experience of the over-exciting and over-rejecting aspects of the original object. The exciting object is the element of the object that is forever teasing, promising, and alluring, however it over-excites the baby without being able to fulfil the longing it powerfully arouses. The rejecting object, on the other hand, is the aspect of the object that treats the child in a depriving, abusive, or neglectful manner (Celani, 2007: 123). Both objects are intolerably excruciating to the child hence they are repressed²

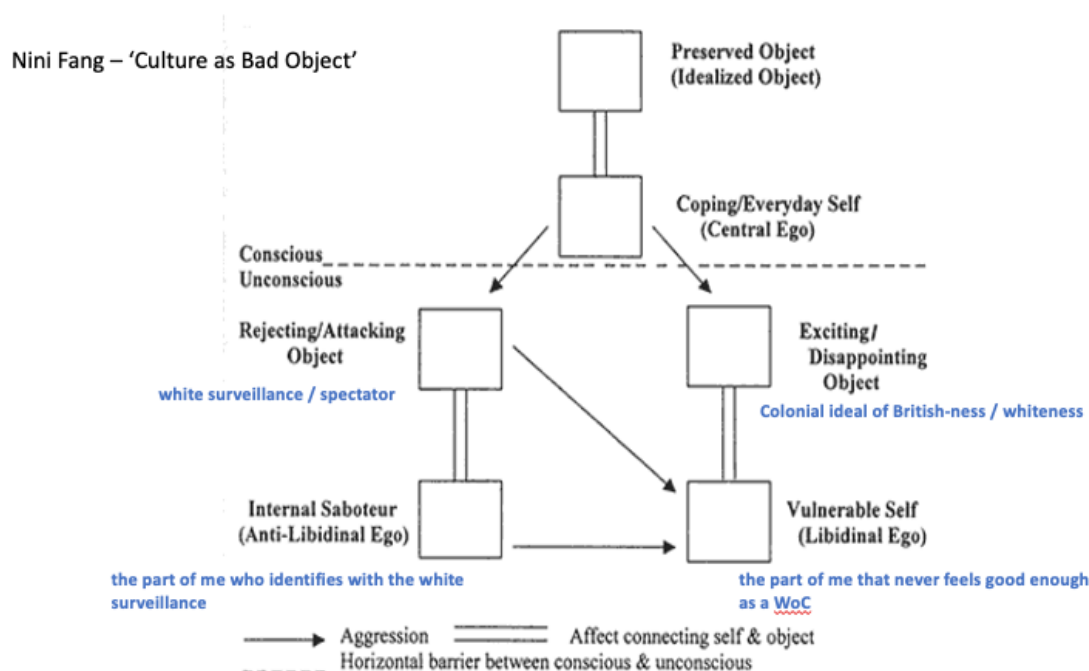
Like Klein, Fairbairn also holds the view that the baby resorts to the defence of splitting, being unable to cope with the reality of infantile dependence. However, this infantile dependence, for Fairbairn, is marked by an oral attitude of incorporation. As the mother becomes split into good and bad, the baby proceeds to incorporate the bad object of the mother in a bid to alleviate the pressure of encountering the other as uncaring and unreliable. Fairbairn believes that incorporation emerges from an unconscious desire to control the bad object that bears reminders of the unruly outside world that fails to fulfil the baby's survival needs..

In other words, the child negotiates an illusory sense of external security at the cost of their internal integrity (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983: 171). Fairbairn terms this 'moral defence' (1943: 65), famously stating:

It is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil. A sinner in a world ruled by God may be bad; but there is always a certain sense of security to be derived from the fact that the world around is good (1943: 66-67)

² Distinct from Melanie Klein's view, repression, in Fairbairn's (1944) view, "originates primarily as a defense against 'bad' internalised objects (and not against [instinctual] impulses [...]) (pp. 93)

Splitting and incorporation go hand in hand, establishing the endopsychic structure that Fairbairn believes to form the unique prototype of individual personality. Whilst Fairbairn's (1943) initial view was that only the bad object came to be internalised, he revised his theory later (1951). He came to believe that not only the bad objects, but also *the aspects of the self that correspond to the internalised bad objects are split-off and repressed* (pp. 168). In other words, not only is the exciting object and the rejecting object internalized and repressed, but so too are the parts of the self that form deep bonds with these bad objects. The parts of the self as split-off from the central ego are what Fairbairn termed 'subsidiary selves' – the parts of us who are tantalised yet disappointed, affectionated yet rejected, needy yet dismissed. This later revision is a crucial moment in Fairbairn's theory, and I believe one that spawns psychosocial potential in his work that is yet to be fulfilled. At its core, what Fairbairn came to see was that – the self is not passively constituted by the objects we internalise, but is an expression of the internal theatre hosting a cast of characters created and re-created through our on-going object-relations.



The UK's Hostile Environment culture constitutes the kind of bad object in Fairbairn's theory to which I relate. On one hand, I was conscious of my dependence on the Home Office as what holds the power to satisfy my (relational) longing to be here; whilst, on the other, I was also made aware of its highly 'militarised hostility' (Bulley, 2017: 15) that treats me at its disposal. My longing to be here necessarily came from my perception of the *exciting* aspects of the 'Britishness' and 'British culture' as good and desirable. Whilst these exciting aspects of the 'Britishness' in hindsight, are mainly constituted by the white colonial ideals that cast the racial others as forever the lesser-than. As Du Bois (2009 [1920], p. 308) contends, 'everything great, good, efficient, fair and honourable is "white". Everything mean, bad, blundering, cheating and dishonourable is "yellow", brown and black'. Nevertheless, this ideal of whiteness excites without being ever able to fulfil. The harder we try, the further we find it shift away from us. Being a racial other means being caught in the perpetual dynamics of dominance and subordination, privilege and servitude. Much of these racial relations are internalised into the endopsychic structure of how one relates to others, and others in the self.

Going back to the bus, the Western gaze which I perceived to bestow so clearly a judgement and disapproval of the rude and the rowdy Chinese was not something I could disassociate from. In light of my vulnerability from my dependence on the Home Office as an immigrant worker, my sense of shame was simultaneously aroused, prompting me to defensive actions – to, quite literally, *side with* the one who has the power to judge and to reject according to a propriety-meter that says: ‘this is how you should behave, and that is not’. The one who excites in me a promise of a better world where a higher order of civility can be restored. My desire to move to the ‘white’ side of the bus was perhaps an expression of the part of me who identified with the rejecting object; in despising the behaviours of those who looked just like me, a rejectable racial other, I relished a sense of self-righteousness that was my entry to the relief of whiteness.

You can perhaps now see how my comment: ‘this is why people *here* don’t like Chinese people!’ reveals much of my identification with the colonial ideal and its surveillance and degradation of the racialised other. Declaring my loyalty to the colonial ideal resembles an act of trading with the devil. Whilst doing so helps me elicit a sense of superiority and righteousness, these are illusory in the context of my racial otherness. This identification with the colonial ideal also divides me up internally – the anti-libidinal ego who insists on seeking identification with the white surveillance and forming bond with it in order to feel powerful and to ward off any real sense of vulnerability; and the libidinal ego who identifies with the colonial ideal, helplessly longing for affection and acceptance by the colonial ideal that she knows will never happen. The part of the self is also constantly attacked by the anti-libidinal ego, the part of herself who despises any human flaws of neediness and dependence. This is the part of my self who identified with the racist feelings and who felt intolerably angered by the ‘*rowdy and unruly Chinese Tourists*’ desperate to move to the ‘white’ side, to be part of the rejecting/attacking object of white surveillance. This is the part of the self that adds insult to injury for the vulnerable part of the self, chillingly accusing her of being inadequate, unlovable and deserving the rejection by the colonial ideal.

So, whilst I said to my partner, ‘this is why people *here* don’t like Chinese people!’; it was also me saying to myself, ‘this is why people *here* don’t like you!’, from the anti-libidinal ego to the libidinal ego. For the anti-libidinal ego could not care less about those sob stories of hers; the sucker who is full of her self-pity about her racial suffering; and if she is rejected, she must have done something to deserve it! This is how the oppressed becomes the oppressor, how, what we cannot bear on the inside becomes our worst nemesis on the outside.

Reference:

Suttie, I. D. [1935] 1960. *The Origins of Love and Hate*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Fairbairn, W. R. D. (1952) *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*. London: Tavistock.

Fang, N. (2020a) 'Narratively (Bang) Out of Order: On Hostile Environment'. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 12(4), 385-393.

Fang, N. (2020b) 'Feeling/being "Out of Place": Psychic Defence Against the Hostile Environment'. *Journal of Psychosocial Studies*, 13(2): 151-164

Fang, N. (2020) 'Depression Reconsidered in Fairbairn's Object Relations Theory'. *Psychodynamic Practice*, 26(1):1-14

Nicholls, L. & Elliot, M. L. (2021) Authors in dialogue - Why race matters: Then, now and for the future, *Journal of Occupational Science*, 28:3, 419-422,

Home Office (2021) 'Home Office measures in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill: Equalities Impact Assessment': <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill-2021-equality-statements/home-office-measures-in-the-police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill-equalities-impact-assessment> [accessed: 24 Sep. 21]

Arendt, H. (1978) *The Life of the Mind: Vol. I & Vol. II*, New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Fairbairn, W. R. D. (1943) "The Repression and The Return of Bad Objects", pp. 59-81, in *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*. London: Tavistock, 1952.

Fairbairn, W. R. D. (1944) "Endopsychic Structure Considered in Terms of Object-Relationships", pp. 82-136, in *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*. London: Tavistock, 1952.

Fairbairn, W. R. D. (1946) 'Object-relationships in Dynamic Structure', pp. 137-153, in *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*. London: Tavistock, 1952.

Fanon, F (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks*. Charles Lam Markmann (trans.). London: Pluto.

Du Bois, W. E. B. (2008 [1920]). *The Souls of White Folk*. In S. Appelrouth, & L. D. Edles (Eds.), *Classical and contemporary sociological theory: Text and readings* (pp. 305– 309). Los Angeles, CA: Pine Forge Press.